



HIS LONG-AWAITED DAY IN THE SUN

*Alexandria native, Negro League star
Leon Day reached baseball's pinnacle*

BY DENISE DUNBAR

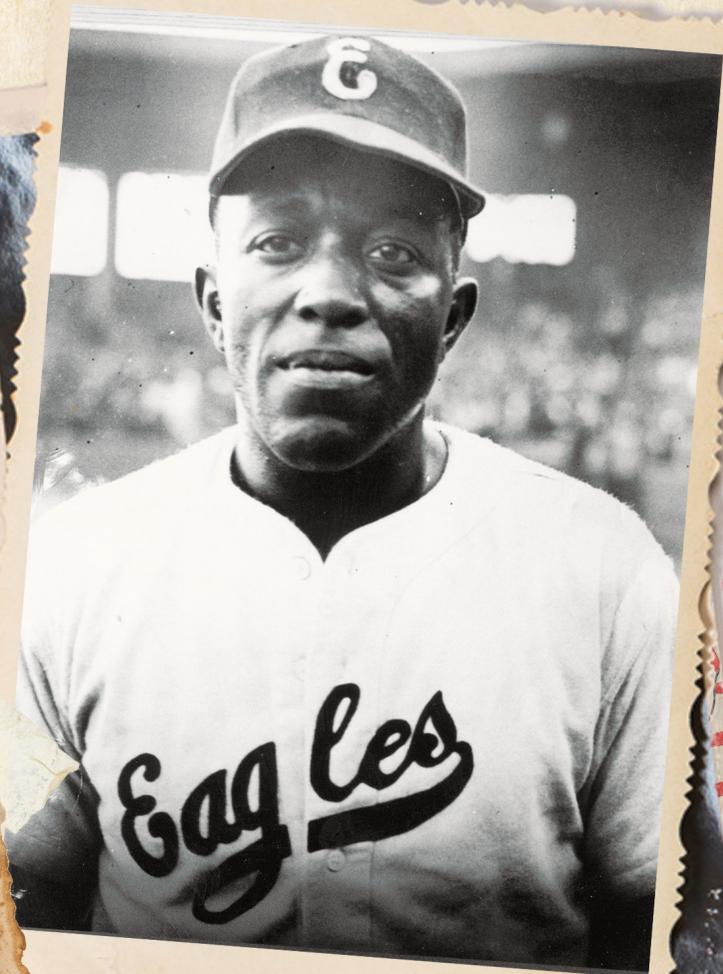
Approximately 3,400 players competed on baseball teams in the Negro Leagues between 1920 and 1948. Thirty-four Negro League players and six executives have been inducted into the National Baseball

Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

One of those 34 players was born in Alexandria – and he's the best player most people, even diehard baseball fans, know nothing about. His name was Leon Day.

SEE LEON DAY

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COURTESY PHOTO



COURTESY PHOTO

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEON DAY AS A MEMBER OF THE NEW-ARK EAGLES; THE 1935 BROOKLYN EAGLES' DAPPER TEAM PHOTO, WITH 19-YEAR-OLD DAY FRONT ROW IN THE CENTER; DAY PLAYED SIX WINTERS IN PUERTO RICO. PICTURED HERE AS A MEMBER OF THE AGUADILLA SHARKS.



PHOTO/DR. LAWRENCE HOGAN/WHEN THE GAME WAS BLACK AND WHITE

CERTIFICATE OF BIRTH
COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
Bureau of Vital Statistics
State Board of Health

File No.—For State Registrar Only.
43082

1 PLACE OF BIRTH
County of _____
Magisterial District of _____
Inc. Town of _____ Registration District No. 2020 Registered No. 206
City of Alexandria (No. 004 Oronoco St. (For use of Local Registrar)
(If birth occurs in a hospital or other institution, give name of same instead of street and number.)

2 Full Name of Child Leon Day
(Do not write in this space if child is not yet named; make supplemental report as directed.)

3 SEX OR GIBL boy 4 Twin or Triplet 5 Number in order of birth 6 Are Parents Married 7 DATE OF BIRTH 8 008 9 20 10 1916
(To be answered only in event of Twins or Triplets)

11 FATHER 12 MOTHER
13 FULL NAME BEFORE MARRIAGE Ellis Day 14 FULL NAME BEFORE MARRIAGE Hattie Lee
15 PRESENT ADDRESS OF FATHER 504 Oronoco St. Alexandria, Va. 16 PRESENT ADDRESS OF MOTHER 504 Oronoco St. Alexandria, Va.
17 WHITE OR COLORED Colored 18 WHITE OR COLORED Colored
19 BIRTHPLACE Alexandria, Va. 20 BIRTHPLACE Alexandria, Va.
21 OCCUPATION Laborer 22 OCCUPATION Domestic
23 Number of children born to this mother, including present birth five 24 Number of children of this mother now living, including present birth five

25 CERTIFICATE OF ATTENDING PHYSICIAN OR MIDWIFE
I hereby certify that I attended the birth of this child, who was _____ at _____ (Hour A. M. or P. M.) on the date above stated.

26 Signature of Physician or Midwife Louise Stewart
27 State whether Physician or Midwife 28 Address of Physician or Midwife
Midwife 1008 Mt. Royal St. Alexandria, Va.

29 Witness (Signature of Witness necessary only when question 23 is signed by mark)
Eugene M. ...
30 Filed Nov 3 1916 at Alexandria, Va. Local Registrar

Additional information as to questions added from a supplemental report.

REGISTRAR: _____

*When there was no attending physician or midwife, then the father, householder, etc., should make this return. If a child breathes even once, it must not be reported as stillborn. No report is desired of stillbirths before the fifth month of pregnancy.

PHOTO/ CHAR MCCARGO BAH

A copy of Leon Day's birth certificate.



PHOTO/DENISE DUNBAR

Leon Day's parents lived at 504 Oronoco St. when he was born on Oct. 30, 1916. The house no longer stands, but was located where the white car is parked.



PHOTO/JAMES A. RILEY

Leon Day as a member of the 1946 Newark Eagles, who won the Negro League Championship. He is seated at the far right.

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Nothing about his origins suggested that Leon Day would become a superlative baseball player who would eventually wind up in three halls of fame. Or that he would be favorably compared to the great Satchel Paige, who he bested in three of the four games they started head-to-head. Or that he would throw a no-hitter and set records for strikeouts in a game in both the Negro and Puerto Rican leagues.

Or that, when he was born in Alexandria one day before Halloween in 1916, Day would eventually advance the cause of racial equality by defeating a white major league pitcher — who happened to play for Gen. George Patton's team — in a 1945 military all-star game played in Nuremberg, Germany in front of 100,000 GIs.

And yet Day accomplished all of the above and more. Because of his many achievements on baseball diamonds throughout the Americas and Europe, a strong case can be made that Day is the best athlete ever born within Alexandria's city limits.

Alexandria roots

Leon Day was the fifth of six children born to Ellis Day and Hattie Lee Day. On Day's birth certificate, Ellis Day is listed as a "laborer" aged 42 and Hattie Day as a "domestic" aged 35. Under the header "white or colored," they were both listed as "colored."

According to his birth certificate, Day was delivered by a midwife named Louise Stewart on Oct. 30, 1916, though it's not clear if the delivery took place at 504 Oronoco St., which is listed as his parents' address on his birth certificate, or at Stewart's Royal Street home.

The house at 504 Oronoco St. is no longer standing, but the location would have been in the parking lot of the Chinese Restaurant currently located at the intersection of

Pitt and Oronoco streets.

Research done by Alexandria Living Legend Char McCargo Bah indicates that both Ellis and Hattie Lee Day were natives of Alexandria. It's not clear whether Ellis Day was related to the family of Ferdinand Day, who was born two years after Leon and went on to become one of Alexandria's most prominent citizens.

A few months after Day's birth, Ellis Day obtained work in Baltimore at the Westport Glass Factory, and the Day family moved to the nearby Mount Winans neighborhood in 1917. According to The Society for American Baseball Research, Winans was then "a poverty-stricken, all-black community in Southwest Baltimore." The Day family's house on Pierpont Street lacked electricity or running water.

Day's primary residences for the rest of his life would be Baltimore and Newark, New Jersey.

Baseball beginnings

Day loved baseball from an early age and played with other neighborhood boys using a broomstick and tennis ball. He would frequently sneak into the ballpark of the local Negro League team, the Baltimore Black Sox, to watch them play.

"It was within walking distance, but it was a good walk, about two miles. I'd go over the fence, under the fence, or sometimes I'd get a foul ball and they'd let me in. Just any way I could get in, I'd get in there," Day told James A. Riley in the book, "Dandy, Day and the Devil."

By the age of 12, Day was playing baseball for the Mount Winans Athletic Club. His high school, Frederick Douglass High School, lacked a baseball team, so, at the age of 17, Day left school to join a semi-pro team. His ability was apparent, and he was soon offered a spot on the Black Sox.

But Day first had to get his father's permission.

"The elder Day asked his anxious son, 'Is that what you really want to do?' 'That's the only thing I want to do' was the honest response. 'Well if that's what you want to do, go ahead,'" Riley wrote in his book.

After the death of his mother in 1934, Day left Baltimore with several Black Sox players and joined the Brooklyn Eagles for a salary of \$50 per month, according to encyclopedia.com. After playing in Brooklyn in 1935, he moved with the Eagles to Newark for the 1936 season, as two teams were combined to form the Newark Eagles. At the age of 20, his career was already about to take off.

Newark Eagles

Day became the Newark Eagles' best pitcher immediately upon joining them. He would pitch for the Eagles for most of the rest of his career.

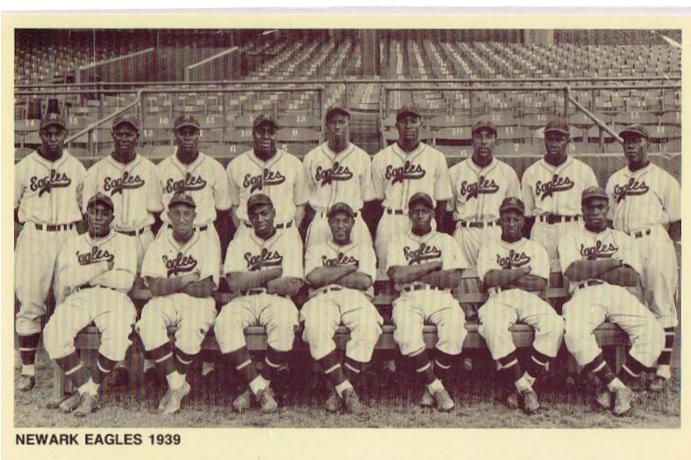
His second year with the team, 1937, is considered by many, including Day himself, to have been his finest season. He pitched to a 13-0 record with a 3.02 ERA and batted .320 with eight home runs.

Day threw a mid-90s fastball which he paired with a precise curveball that kept batters off balance. His unorthodox pitching motion proved deceptive to hitters.

Day pitched from the stretch at all times, like the Washington Nationals' Stephen Strasburg, with no windup. Some said Day "pitched from his shoulder" as he short-armed the ball, but he actually threw from his hip, like an infielder.

"That's the only way I could throw," Day told Riley. Throwing overhand like most pitchers do hurt his shoulder, he said.

Known for being modest and humble about his baseball accomplishments, the 5'9" 180-pound Day was a



NEWARK EAGLES 1939

PHOTO/COURTESY ROBERT HIERONIMUS

The 1939 Newark Eagles. Leon Day is seated at the bottom left.

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notable competitor on the diamond. He was known for pitching inside to hitters, which is referred to as “dusting them back.”

“Pitcher Leon Day, one of the great dusters of all time, chomped on his fat cigar while remembering his days on the mound. ‘People say my best pitch was my fast ball. Wrong. My best pitch was my knockdown pitch,’ [Day] laughed. ‘You’ve heard of tight pitches being called ‘chin music?’ Well, I gave ‘em a whole symphony!’” Day recounted in “When the Game was Black and White.”

An outstanding all-around player, Day manned second base and the outfield most days that he wasn’t pitching. There were many, including fellow Hall of Famer Monte Irvin, who believed Day could have made the Hall as a centerfielder because of his defense and hitting.

“He’s played center field as good or better than our starting center fielder did. The center fielder at that time was me,” Irvin said to Brad Snyder of the Baltimore Sun.

Unfortunately, while playing in Cuba in the winter of 1937, Day slipped while in the shower and felt something pull in his right arm as he caught himself. He missed the 1938 season as a result.

“I just couldn’t do it. I

couldn’t throw. I didn’t play in 1938. My arm was bad,” Day told Riley.

Day’s injury was prior to the era of trainers, diagnosis and researched exercises, so Day became his own trainer, working out with irons, loosening and strengthening his arm. The next spring, he literally “threw the soreness out of it,” according to Riley. He gradually eased back into competition and soon was as dominant as ever.

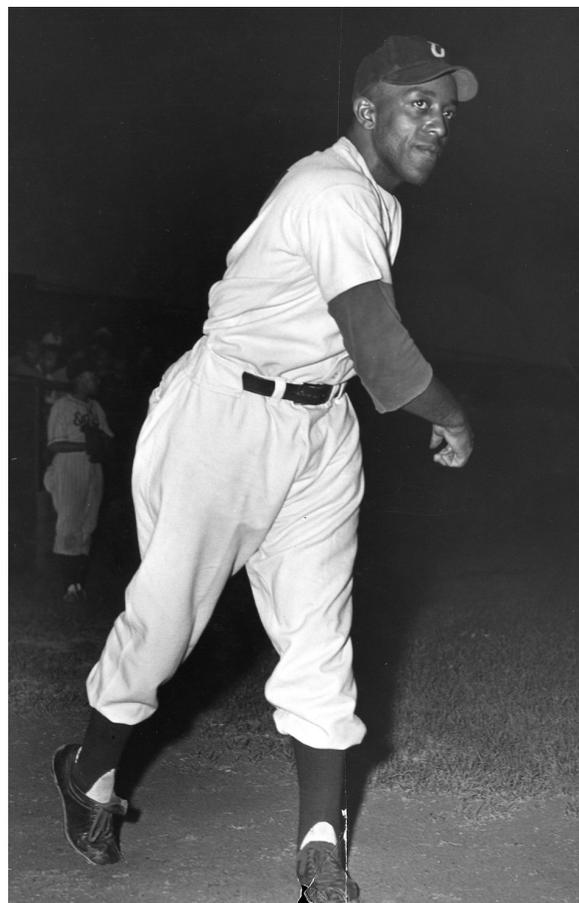
In 1942, Day played on a Newark Eagles squad that was one of the best teams ever assembled in the Negro Leagues. Seven people associated with the team – six players and team co-owner Effa Manley, who was a pioneering woman baseball executive – wound up being inducted into the National Baseball of Fame.

On July 31, 1942, Day set a Negro League record by striking out 18 Baltimore Elite Giants while only giving up one bloop hit. The Pittsburgh Courier, one of the leading papers covering the Negro Leagues at the time, ranked Day ahead of Satchel Paige as the best pitcher in both 1942 and 1943.

“Leon Day is the best pitcher in Negro baseball ... despite the fact he is used daily either as a pitcher, outfielder, or infielder,” The Courier wrote.

The Negro Leagues

To fully appreciate Day’s



COURTESY PHOTO

Left: Leon Day’s pitching motion. He threw with a ‘short-arm,’ no windup delivery.

Top Right: Day retired in Baltimore, where his family moved to from Alexandria.

Bottom Right: A mural by artist Robert Hieronimus, called “A Little Help from our Friends,” on Greenmount Avenue in Baltimore. Day is depicted at the top right.



PHOTO/BALTIMORE SUN



PHOTO/ROBERT HIERONIMUS

significance, it’s instructive to view his career in the overall context of the Negro Leagues, which were founded 100 years ago and have been celebrated throughout 2020.

Baseball was somewhat integrated in the 1870s through early 1890s, as Black and white players frequently competed against each other and, on rare occasions, were even on the same team. That ended as Jim Crow laws began taking effect in the 1890s.

Because they weren’t allowed to compete against white players, Black players had no choice but to play on and against all-Black teams. Most teams were owned by white men, who controlled scheduling of games and pocketed most of the receipts. Players frequently jumped from team to team and from the U.S. to Mexico to the Caribbean and back in search of higher pay.

All-star teams barnstormed around the country and played in multi-day tournaments. It was wild, unorganized and unregulated.

Rube Foster, a former star Black pitcher around the turn of the 20th century, finally became fed up with the status quo, and in 1920 formed the first official, organized Negro League. Black Americans subsequently owned their own teams, Black players were better compensated and greater stability ensued.

“In fact, the Negro Leagues were among the largest black businesses in the United States before the breakdown of segregation; in their prime they were a multi-million-dollar operation,” Donn Rogosin wrote in “Invisible Men.”

It was as close to a golden era for Black players as could be attained in strictly segregated America, and the Negro Leagues became an important

part of Black communities.

According to “Shades of Glory,” the popularity of the league was evidenced by attendance numbers: Between 1938 and 1948, “the Negro Leagues’ East-West [All-Star] game outdrew the major league All-Star game seven times. The reason, which had become painfully obvious by 1943, was simple. These black baseball players were every bit as good as white players.”

“Confronted by an intolerant society, the black athlete and the black community built their own sports world ... the very best [players] became genuine heroes,” Rogosin wrote. “The feats of black pitching masters ... became treasured memories for a people held down by a segregation all too easily accepted by others.”

Day’s career began at

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PHOTO/ ROBERT HIERONIMUS

Leon Day's widow Geraldine with his plaque from the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Day was inducted on July 30, 1995, four-and-a-half months after his death.

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the very peak of the Negro Leagues' popularity and lasted until the leagues dissolved a few years after Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson in 1945 to break the major league color barrier, which he did two years later.

Effa Manley, who ran the Newark Eagles during Day's entire tenure there, lamented the fact that Day never got the chance afforded his younger Eagles teammates – like Irvin and Larry Doby, who was the first Black player in the American League.

"And Leon Day – it's a shame he was born when he was. He played every position on the field except catch, and played them all magnificently," Manley said in John Holway's "Voices from the Great Black Negro Leagues." "Those boys; my heart just aches for them that they were born too soon."

Characteristically, Day didn't outwardly lament the fact that he never played a game in the major leagues. Instead, he emphasized the importance of the Negro Leagues.

"Sunday in Newark in the 1930s and '40s was church, a

doubleheader, and then either out to dinner or to a friend's home for dinner," Day recalled in "When the Game was Black and White." "Everyone dressed to the nines. The ballgame was the centerpiece of Sunday, and Sunday was the main day off for people. We were the backbone of Sunday, no matter where we were playing."

At the very end of his career, Day spent three years playing minor league baseball, where he and other Black players who were integrating the minors faced discrimination playing in segregated towns for little pay and without fanfare.

"We didn't worry about that. ... See we loved to play baseball. As long as we played, we didn't care where we played," Day said in 1992 to Tom Keyser of the Baltimore Sun.

Military service

Great white players such as Ted Williams and Bob Feller had their baseball careers interrupted by their service during World War II – and the Korean War in Williams' case – for which they were rightly praised. But Negro League stars also sacrificed prime

years from their careers for their country, including Day, who served two and a half years during WWII.

Day entered the military in September 1943, while still in his prime as a baseball player. The next year he would go from the baseball diamonds of America to Normandy, France. He went ashore at Utah Beach six days after D-Day, landing as a member of the 818th Amphibian Battalion.

Day related a vivid memory of Utah Beach to Riley:

"I remember one night when I came out of the water with a load of ammunition and the Germans started dropping flares and lit the beach up so bright that you could have read a newspaper. I heard the planes coming, so I jumped out of the duck and ran up the bank. A MP had a hole there, a sand-bagged place. I couldn't see him, but he said, 'Soldier! I said, 'Yeah?' He said, 'Come on in here.' So I went in his hole and I got in there and we were trembling and the planes coming, strafing everything and shooting everything up on the beach. He said, 'Who's driving that

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PHOTO/DENISE DUNBAR

Leon Day's bobblehead from the National Bobblehead Hall of Fame. It is part of their Negro Leagues Centennial Team Bobbleheads.

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duck out there?' I said, 'I am.' He said, 'What has it got on it?' I said, 'Ammunition.' He said, 'Move that duck from out in front of this hole!' I said, 'Go out there and move it your own damn self!'"

After the war

Perhaps Day's greatest triumph on the mound came after the fighting ended, when he was chosen for the Overseas Invasion Service Expedition team, made up mostly of semi-pro players. They were slated to play Gen. George Patton's team, the heavily favored, all-white Third Army team consisting mostly of major leaguers, in Nuremburg, Germany.

"They were bragging about how they were going to beat us," Day told Riley.

Day was one of only two Black players on his team, but he outpitched major leaguer Ken Heintzelman by a score of 2-1. Day allowed only four hits and showed 100,000 spectating soldiers that Negro League players were equal to – or in Day's case better than – their major league counterparts.

Unfortunately, Day and his teammates were allowed no training period to prepare for their games in Nuremburg, despite their long layoff from

baseball, and Day strained his shoulder pitching in Germany. He later said his arm never felt right again.

The 1946 Negro League season nonetheless contained two significant events for Day. He threw his first and only Negro League no-hitter on opening day against the Philadelphia Stars, after which Day's teammates carried him off the field in triumph. Then, the Eagles defeated the Kansas City Monarchs to win the Negro League Championship.

Though his arm remained sore, Day, drawn by the paychecks, played in both Mexico and Cuba during the 1947 and 1948 seasons.

"I made more money in Mexico than I did here in the States. I played about four months a year and made about \$5,000," Day told John Holway in "Day Crossed a Road Less Traveled to Cooperstown."

Day finished up his career playing for the Baltimore Elite Giants in his last Negro League season, before his three years in minor league baseball, where he was primarily a utility player.

Day finished his Negro League career with a record seven appearances for a pitcher in the East-West all-star game, where he set the record with 14 strikeouts. His 19 strikeouts in a single game set the record in the Puerto Rican league, while his 18 strikeouts in 1942 set the Negro League single-game record.

Day received numerous honors after his career ended. Baltimore named a street near the Orioles' Camden Yards stadium Leon Day Way, while Newark named Day Way after him. There is also Leon Day Park in Baltimore, and a statue of Day stands at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri.

Day was part of a group of former Negro League players who were honored at the White House by Pres-

ident George H.W. Bush in 1992, where they reportedly amused the president by making themselves at home in the Oval Office.

Despite being honored by membership in the Negro Leagues Hall of Fame and the Puerto Rican Hall of Fame, the one honor that Day most want-

ed was to be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

Quest for the Hall

It was a tough path for Negro League stars like Day, who never reached the major leagues, to become enshrined in the National Baseball Hall

of Fame, regardless of their accomplishments.

While former Negro League players like Robinson, Paige, Doby, Irwin, Roy Campanella and others were well known to white America because they became

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major league standouts, Negro League stars who never reached “the show” – with a few exceptions – had to wait decades before being inducted into Cooperstown.

Someone like Day, an unassuming man who seldom tooted his own horn, was even more likely to be overlooked.

“He was never a self promoter. If he were, he might have been elected [to the Hall of Fame] years ago. But he was a humble man and let his record speak for itself,” Negro League historian Todd Bolton said, as quoted by SABR.

As the typically understated Day told Keyser, “I could hold my own.”

Fortunately for Day, several people took up his cause. Riley’s 1987 book, “Dandy Day and the Devil” was an attempt to educate the baseball-loving public about the accomplishments of Ray Dandridge, Day and Willie Wells.

Day’s case was relentlessly promoted by Baltimore artist Robert Hieronimus, who became a champion for Negro League players he felt had suffered discrimination.

“This process is not a very fair process,” Hieronimus told Justin Klugh in an article for FanGraphs, “Who is Leon Day?” “Since Leon was small and black, and since he never talked big about himself, most people didn’t realize how important he was. And that’s why we had to speak out for him.”

After a couple of near misses on Hall of Fame votes, in 1995 it appeared that Day was finally going to be voted in. Unfortunately, by then Day was 78 and his health was failing.

On March 7, 1995, when Day was finally voted into the Hall of Fame, he was hospitalized in Baltimore.

“... They wheeled Day out of the operating room to deliver the news to a 78-year-old man with a failing heart

and trouble in his kidneys. ‘Where’s Dr. Hieronimus?’ Day demanded. ‘... We told him what happened ... He did not believe it. He almost cried, right then,’” Hieronimus told Klugh.

Six days after being voted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, Leon Day died.

Day’s Hall of Fame plaque, which he never saw, reads:

“Leon Day, Negro Leagues 1934-1949

Used deceptive, no-wind up, short-arm delivery to compile impressive single-season and career statistics during 10 years in Negro Leagues. Also played ball in Puerto Rico, Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico and Canada. Set Negro National League record in 1942 with 18 strikeouts in game. Hurlled no-hitter on opening day 1946 for Newark Eagles vs. Philadelphia Stars. Pitched in record 7 Negro League all-star games.”

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-Olivia Doran contributed research to this article.



PHOTO/CATHY COMBS/FINDAGRAVE

Leon Day's grave marker in Arbutus Memorial Park in Baltimore.



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